

PWLL DU CAVE MANAGEMENT GROUP.

Annual General Meeting 3rd July 2010

Secretary's Report

A lot has happened since our last meeting in December 2009 and I would like to take the opportunity to set out the details below. Most events have concerned the status of the entrance at Drws Cefn, but there has also been progress on a couple of other issues.

Drws Cefn

Following the last meeting in December I reported on the outcome of the vote and provided minutes to Peter Jones of PwllDu Conservation Limited (PDCL). He indicated that he would like to allow some time for things to calm down and for Stuart France to approach him about alternative access agreements as he indicated in the meeting. He also reiterated his previous concerns about various aspects of the DC entrance including its visibility and proximity to the tramroad, as well as the inappropriate attitude of the diggers when encountered on PDCL land. During this period I was also approached by Stuart France.

By February 2010 PDCL were concerned that there was no way forward and issued an ultimatum: if an agreement was not reached that was satisfactory to PDCL by the end of March then all access to the cave would be removed. This ultimatum was issued to myself, to Stuart France and to the CCC and contained details of PDCL concerns which needed to be addressed, namely:

- Damage to the tramroad (a CADW ancient monument)
- Liability in terms of the public (increased under CROW), livestock and protected species (bats)
- Lack of respect shown by the caving community in opening of the entrance

At the end of February myself and Ben Lovett met with Stuart France and Nig Rogers to discuss the situation. It was clear to myself from discussion with PDCL that they did not wish to see DC used and were extremely unhappy about the behaviour of some parts of the caving community. I tried in vain at this meeting to persuade the diggers that this was the case, but was variously accused of lying and was threatened.

Following this encounter, PDCL issued a clarifying statement to be read out at the Cambrian Caving Council AGM on the 7th March. This statement, which is appended to this report, concluded that:

“However if no agreement is obtained which ensures that no future attempts to reopen or add additional entrances to the one agreed and which is also acceptable to us, then it is our intention to close all entrances to the Ogof Draenen system from the beginning of April.”

Myself and Ben Lovett attended the CCC AGM on behalf of the PDCMG where it was unanimously agreed that the CCC would write to PDCL to express their support for the landowner’s position. Concurrently myself and Ben Lovett had been consulting the PDCMG reps, firstly by phone, then by email when details of the ultimatum was circulating on the internet, in order to discuss the problem of the chasm between PDCL’s concerns and the diggers’ position. Following PDCL’s statement and the CCC AGM I then requested agreement from the PDCMG club reps for a letter of support from the PDCMG to PDCL. The aim of this letter (attached) was to show that the caving community supported PDCL’s position and would behave in a responsible manner if permitted to retain access to Ogof Draenen. Support of the PDCMG member clubs, combined with support from the CCC (whose members are required to respect the right of the landowner to grant and withhold access) covered the majority of cavers in South Wales. At the CCC AGM, GOG (the principle diggers) applied for and were admitted to the CCC on the basis that they accepted the constitution of the CCC including the principle that Landowners wishes be respected.

The BCA AGM also fell before the end of March deadline and Ben Lovett and myself attended this on the 20th March on behalf of the PDCMG. Here two items of business were relevant. Firstly, Andy Eavis, in his Chairman’s report included a strong statement about respect for landowners and this has subsequently appeared in Descent. Secondly, Elsie Little, as Conservation & Access Officer reported her concerns about access at Draenen and her fear that difficulties may spread to other landowners in the area. It was suggested that the BCA should also offer their support to PDCL and Mike McCombe of the CCC duly formally requested this. A letter from the C&A committee was issued on the 24th March and this included a comprehensive statement about the rights associated with CROW land (“open access” land). This useful document, which clarifies that caving is not covered under CROW has subsequently also been published in Descent.

As a consequence of these efforts and the hard work of a number of individuals, on the 31st March PDCL agreed that access to Ogof Draenen is to be retained, but by the original entrance only (see attached correspondence). PDCL also stated that they expected DC to be closed permanently (while taking due account of the bat population). Many thanks to those on the PDCMG, at the CCC and at the BCA who helped to preserve access to the cave.

In the build up to the ultimatum deadline at the end of March I was also engaged in a long correspondence with Stuart France. This was initiated by Stuart, who despite having seen the statement from PDCL, was still trying to obtain from the PDCMG a “negotiated settlement” on access to DC, when it was clear that PDCL did not want to permit access. While Stuart finally agreed on the 29th March to

respect the landowner's position, he had already provided copies of this private correspondence to third parties which led to these being selectively published on the internet. This was followed by use of data from Stuart's "caver counters" (see also below) to track the movements of myself and Ben Lovett through the cave and publish these with accompanying unfounded allegations.

Following Stuart France's agreement to respect PDCL's position he also agreed to provide keys to the DC entrance. Although Stuart had originally provided keys directly to Peter Jones after installation of the gate last year, Peter had observed that the padlock had since changed twice, and consequently his keys no longer fitted the lock. After a wait of almost two weeks I received keys for DC through the post on 8th April. Pete Hobson agreed to change the padlock for me with the aim of providing keys for PDCL (but not for the PDCMG). However, when he visited the site on the 9th April the keys supplied were found not to fit the lock. It is not known who had changed the lock a further time. After waiting to see if further keys would be forthcoming the padlock was finally forcibly changed on the 24th April and all keys were provided directly to the landowners.

Finally I come to arranging the "permanent closure" of DC that has been requested. Any closure of the entrance must meet a number of criteria. Firstly it must prevent access by cavers and passing members of the public. But secondly it must permit access by the bat population. In May, myself and Rhian Hicks met with Peter Jones, Tim Guilford (Prof Animal Behaviour, caver and Draenen ecology enthusiast), Stuart Reid (CCW) and Jenna Buss (CCW Species Officer) to discuss how best to arrange closure whilst protecting and conserving the bat population. The meeting was on site at Drws Cefn which allowed the ecologists to inspect the bat access. We agreed in principle a means of securing the entrance using a horizontal letter box to allow free access to bats. This will be located at the break in the entrance shaft in order to permit circling of bats either side of the letter box. A lightweight grill or similar at the surface will minimize the aesthetic impact while permitting bat access and preventing access from passers-by. As bats have been observed hanging within the cave in the vicinity of the DC entrance, then the area is legally a roost and thus protected under UK and European law. Works here must therefore be carried out under License approved by the CCW and we are in the process of obtaining that Licence at present.

Surface Digging

On a more positive note, in late March, Owen Clarke and Cwmbran CC hosted a successful and friendly meeting of interested individuals (local and not so local cavers!) regarding digging in the vicinity of Ogof Draenen. Owen's aim was to get agreement to the following statement, which I believe was accepted by all present:

"it would be accepted that digging on any local land with the landowners permission is acceptable, but that is a dig is unfortunate enough to break

into the surveyed passages of Ogof Draenen, there must be a locked gate installed close to the breakthrough point, the key to which will be held by PDCMG for them to hold and issue for purposes of rescue, grade 5 surveying or exploration as they see fit"

Subsequently Owen had discussions with Stuart France who wished to see the last sentence amended to *"rescue, grade 5 surveying, exploration or scientific study. Such permission should neither be unreasonably refused to suitable parties for a suitable purpose, nor should it be called for in excess"*.

These meetings arose partly as following the events surrounding DC there had been concern by some individuals that the PDCMG is not permitting digging within the Ogof Draenen catchment. I would like to state categorically that this is not the case. The Entrance Policy is that potential future entrances should be assessed on a case by case basis. However, this is *policy* which the PDCMG would like people to respect; it cannot, by the nature of the PDCMG be enforced. Having said this, since agreement of this policy last year, the landowner has requested there to be no digging of further entrances on PDCL owned land as a condition of access to Ogof Draenen. However, this applies to PDCL land only. I can see that, given the above discussions, there would be benefit to clarifying PDCMG policy with respect to surface digging in other areas.

Tramroad above Drws Cefn

Myself and Ben Lovett have suggested that if PDCL can obtain funding for materials from CADW for repairs to the tramroad then the caving community would be happy to carry out the works. This initiative has received support from a number of individuals with whom I have spoken to about it.

Caver Counters

Since late 2009 Stuart France has installed 8 caver counters within Ogof Draenen (see CSS newsletter 53(2) March 2010). These are located in the Entrance Series, Gilwern Passage, Indiana Highway, Round Trip, Rift Chamber, Lucky 13, Drws Cefn, and Wessex.

I would like to make it clear that no permission has been given by either the landowner or the PDCMG for the installation of caver counters in Ogof Draenen. This is in contravention to the Code of Conduct for access to the cave, which requests that proposed projects, such as scientific study, which may have a significant impact on other cavers, should be undertaken after consultation with the management group. While it is true that caver counters, if used responsibly can provide anonymous counts of *"people behaviour, not actual people"* it is unfortunate that the caver counters in Draenen have been recently been used precisely to identify and track individual cavers without their consent.

This committee needs to decide whether it wishes to retain these counters within Ogof Draenen or request that they are removed.

Survey Policy

At the EGM in November 2009 there was an action on myself, John Stevens and John Pybus regarding drafting of a revised survey policy. Given the events described above I have not had the time to drive this forward. However, it is hoped this can now progress further over the coming months.

Fixed Aids

The PDCMG does not officially manage fixed aids in Ogof Draenen. However, worn out ropes have recently been replaced at the entrance series climb, on Indiana Highway traverses and at Balcony pitch. Many thanks to Ali Garman and Jules Carter for carrying out this work. A further discussion of fixed aids and the Balcony Pitch ladder will follow at Agenda item 5a.

Website

Martin Laverty has indicated that he is happy to continue to look after the website for the PDCMG. We both feel there is an opportunity to do more with this site to publicise the activity of the PDCMG, and potentially to host survey data, photos, biological and geological information etc. This is something I would like to discuss further with the Group under Agenda item 5b.

Countryside Council for Wales

I have had a number of discussions with the CCW in recent months and have invited them to become more involved with the management of Ogof Draenen. The intention is that Stuart Reid and Gareth Owen from the CCW will attend meetings and get up to speed on the relevant issues. Stuart is unfortunately on holiday at the moment, but I hope to see Gareth at this meeting.

Attachments:

[Email Peter Jones to Mike McCombe \(CCC\) 4th March 2010](#)

[Letter PDCMG to PDCL 15th March 2010](#)

[Secretary Report 100703 Attach3.pdf](#)